

# **The Role of Faith in Child Marriage: Empirical Evidence from Mozambique, Nepal, and the Philippines**

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**Abstract:** Traditional and religious justifications have been identified to support the continued practice of child marriage. However, the role of faith in child marriage has not been widely studied. This mixed-method study investigates the role of faith in child marriage in Mozambique, Nepal, and the Philippines. Faith and religion are deeply ingrained in these communities, as most survey respondents identified with a faith group and practiced their religion in both private and public domains. Faith was found to have an impact on child marriage through beliefs around gender roles. Although this trend was observed in all countries, there were variations between them, highlighting the significance of local context. Addressing child marriage requires a comprehensive approach that considers both faith and gender norms.

**Keywords:** faith, child marriage, mixed methods, Mozambique, Nepal, the Philippines

The past few decades have witnessed considerable efforts from international and national actors to address child marriage, defined as a marriage or union before the age of 18 (Corno and Voena 2016; Paul and Mondal 2021; UNICEF 2021). Significant progress has been made, preventing 25 million child marriages and reducing the global child marriage prevalence rates by about 10 percent in the past five years (UNICEF 2021; UN n.d). Despite this progress, child marriage remains a global problem (Nguyen and Wodon 2015; Paul and Mondal 2021; UNICEF 2021). In 2020, 21% of young women worldwide were married before the age of 18 (UNICEF 2021). Annually, 12 million girls under 18 are married (UNICEF 2021).

Efforts to reduce child marriage have primarily focused on addressing drivers such as poor access to education and economic factors (Malhotra and Elnakib 2021). Despite the efforts to increase educational and economic opportunities for girls and families, as well as legislative bans on child marriage the practice persists. Many have indicated that the effects of the educational and economic efforts have been undermined by norms around child marriage, rooted in traditional and religious justifications, that remain unchanged (Corno and Voena 2016; UNICEF 2016; McCleary-Sills et al. 2015; Nguyen and Wodon 2015; Parsons et al. 2015; Prettitore 2015). This is an important point considering that 84% of the world's population is affiliated with religion (Pew Research Center 2012). Hence, investigating the role played by faith in underpinning the practice of child marriage is crucial, as it can greatly contribute to creating interventions that would strengthen protective factors (ICRW 2007; Parsons et al. 2015; Rumble et al. 2018).

Faith can play a key role in bringing about positive social and behavior change through influencing norms in communities and societies, particularly ones where faith is an important part of everyday life (Barrett, Payne, and Niyonkuru 2019; Eyber et al. 2020, 2019). Faith is an essential component of norms which shape personal and collective attitudes and values as well as individual and community practices around caring for and protecting children, family structures, and relationships (Barrett, Payne, and Niyonkuru 2019; Wilkinson, van Mierlo, and Trotta 2019). Hence, the role of faith actors, congregations, wider community members, and individuals in engaging with faith for social and behavior change is important (Eyber et al. 2020, 2019).

In most contexts globally, faith is a source of individual and collective identity and faith norms shape individual and collective behavior in an interconnected manner. Individuals can have different drivers for complying with norms (e.g. sanctions, disapproval, cooperation, reciprocity, rewards, and rational individualist interests) (Ostrom 2014; Legros and Cislighi 2020). Understanding the role that faith plays can help engage with faith and faith actors more meaningfully to bring about positive behavior change. Further issues to investigate include how levels of religiosity and engagement in mechanisms of faith (such as the engagement with rituals, sacred texts, and communal faith practices) influence the perceived expectations of the reference group and impact behavior related to norms.

There is an increasing body of research that indicates how religiosity and existing faith-based norms and beliefs in the community and neighborhood affect individual and collective attitudes and practices on child protection and care (Eyber et al. 2020, 2019; Giladi 2014; Miller-Perrin and Perrin 2017) Thus, engaging faith actors and communities in social and behavior change for better protection of children is crucial (Wilkinson, van Mierlo, and Trotta 2019).

Studies exploring the relationship between faith, religion, and child marriage in the past few years have yielded mixed results. For example, Gage (2013) did not find a significant association between the religiosity of parents/caregivers and their attitudes against child marriage in Ethiopia. In contrast, Gemignani and Wodon (2015) discovered a link between faith affiliation and the practice of child marriage in the Demographic and Health Survey from 33 countries<sup>1</sup> in Africa. They noted that Muslims and those with traditional or Animist beliefs had higher rates of child marriage than Roman Catholics and Protestants. They further observed that the relationship between faith affiliation and child marriage varied across and within countries, with their case study on Burkina Faso illustrating that communities sharing the same faith might differ in their practices and beliefs, highlighting the importance of local context.

Similarly, Mbojali et al. (2020) found that ethnic and religious affiliation had a strong and direct association with the practice of child marriage in Nigeria. Different ethnic and/or religious groups exhibited varying prevalence rates of child marriage, as well as distinct traditional beliefs, cultural values, and social norms regarding child marriage, the value of females, and women's autonomy. For instance, child marriage was most prevalent among northern tribes of Hausa/Fulani, significantly higher than among southern tribes of Yoruba and Igbo. Mbojali and colleagues also noted that Muslim communities had higher rates of child marriage than Christian ones, especially in the 12 states of Nigeria that have instituted Sharia laws without domesticating the Child Rights Act (Mbojali et al. 2020).

In a Western context, Uecker (2014) studied early marriage (below 25 years old) in the USA from a predominantly Christian perspective. He identified an association between early marriage and religion by examining respondents' religious affiliation, commitment, and scriptural beliefs. For Uecker, religion acts as a cultural schema—a socially constructed framework for interpreting, understanding, and evaluating self, society, and social relations. This schema only becomes relevant to an individual if they participate in religious services/events/prayers, allowing them to develop a religious identity and connect with a like-minded community. Thus, the religious context becomes crucial for individuals wanting to fit in and adopt beliefs aligned with their community's religious schema. Uecker's findings suggest that young people with schoolmates holding strong pro-early marriage beliefs based on religion are more likely to marry early, underlining the influence of religious context.

Further, the literature underlines the positive impact of faith actors in combating violence against children, encompassing prevention, advocacy, direct intervention, service provision, and survivor support. It further asserts that faith-based organizations often possess a greater capacity to engage with and influence communities across different settings than

governments or NGOs, due to their established trust and alignment with community beliefs and cultural practices. However, the effectiveness and impact of these faith-based initiatives remain underassessed (Rutledge and Eyber 2019).

The mixed findings from these studies highlight the need for further research to elucidate the relationship between faith and child marriage. This article presents the findings of a study conducted in partnership with World Vision, examining the role of faith in child marriage across communities with diverse contexts in Mozambique, Nepal, and the Philippines. In each country, the research was conducted in two sites with a high prevalence of child marriage (anonymized for ethical reasons). In Mozambique, one site was located in the southern part of the country with a predominantly Christian population, while the second site was in the northern part with a majority Muslim community. In Nepal, the selected research areas had a predominantly Hindu population, but they differed geographically. One community was situated in the mountainous terrain in the northern part of the country, while the other was in the southern part on the plains. In the Philippines, the research areas were communities that were home to the country's Muslim minority group.

The article has four sections, with the first one providing contexts of study countries. The second section gives an overview of the methodology. The quantitative and qualitative findings are presented in the third section, which starts off with the findings on the religiosity level of survey respondents to set the faith and religious context in the study communities. This is followed by the presentation of quantitative and qualitative findings on faith norms on child marriage. The last section discusses the findings, followed by a conclusion.

## **Context of Study Countries**

### *Mozambique*

Mozambique has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world and the second highest in the Eastern and Southern African sub-region (UNICEF 2021, b). In 2021, 48% of women aged 20-24 married or were in a sexual union by the age of 18 and 14% by the age of 15 (UNICEF 2021, b). Child marriage is more prevalent in rural regions (56%) than in urban areas (36%) (UNICEF 2021b; UNICEF, UNFPA, and CECAP 2015a).

In 2019, Mozambique passed a law setting the legal minimum age of marriage at 18 for both genders. This law supersedes the previous legislation that allowed children to marry at the age of 16 with parental consent. The current law also imposes a penalty of up to 12 years of imprisonment for an adult marrying a minor (UNICEF 2021b). The Mozambique government also made changes to legislation on children's rights, family law, and domestic violence (McLeod, Barr, and Rall 2019).

Mozambique has a diverse religious landscape, with 57.6% of the population self-identifying as Christian. Denominational diversity includes 26.2% Roman Catholics, 15.1% Zionist Christians, 14.7% Evangelical/Pentecostal, and 1.6% Anglican. Muslims constitute 18.3% of the population, primarily residing in the northern regions of the country, with key groups being Sunni and Ismaili (Trovão 2017). Around 4.7% of the population adhere to Jewish, Hindu, and Baha'i faiths. Approximately 13% of the population does not have a religious affiliation (United States Department of State 2022).

### *Nepal*

Nepal has one of the highest rates of child marriage in South Asia, with around 40% of women aged 20-49 had been married before the age of 18 in 2016. There were five million girls who married before the age of 18, and out of this number, 1.3 million married before the age of 15 in 2016 (UNICEF 2019).

The Government of Nepal has made considerable efforts to eliminate child marriage. The minimum age of marriage in Nepal is 20 years for both girls and boys, according to the Marriage Registration Act of 1971. However, with parental consent, young people can marry at the age of 18. The government adopted a National Strategy to End Child Marriage in Nepal by 2030 (UNFPA Nepal, 2016). In 2018, the Ministry of Health and Population developed and launched an Adolescent Health and Development Strategy, with one of the targets being to end child marriage in Nepal (Girls Not Brides 2024).

The census in 2011 identified ten religions present in Nepal. 81.3% of the population self-identified as Hindu, 9% belonged to the Buddhist faith, and 4.4% to Islam. There were also followers of Kirat (3.1%) and Christianity (1.4%). The remaining 5.2% were represented by other faith groups such as Prakriti, Bon, Jainism, Bahai, and Sikhism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nepal n.d.).

### *Philippines*

The Philippines has the 12th highest rate of child marriage in the world, with 17% of girls marrying before the age of 18 and 2% before the age of 15 (End Violence Against Children 2022). As in other contexts, COVID-19 triggered an increase in the child marriage rate, with around 10 million additional girls at risk of marrying before the age of 18 (End Violence Against Children 2022).

The legal minimum age of marriage in the Philippines is 18. Marriage under the age of 25 requires parental consent (Girls Not Brides 2023). In January 2022, marriage under 18 years old was banned in the new "Prohibition of Child Marriage" Law (the passage of Republic Act No 11569) that criminalized the practice and imposed penalties for individuals involved in facilitating or solemnizing underage marriages (End Violence Against Children 2022).

In 2020, 78.8% of the population in the Philippines self-identified as Roman Catholic. Another 14.8% of the population belonged to other denominations of Christianity, such as Seventh Day Adventist, Aglipay, Iglesia Filipina Independiente, Bible Baptist Church, United Church of Christ in the Philippines, Jehovah's Witness, and Church of Christ. Finally, 6.4% of the population, mostly in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Mindanao, identified as Muslim (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023).

### **Objective of the Research and Key Definitions**

The objective of the research was to explore the role of faith in child marriage from the perspective of community attitudes and practices. The study used a working concept of "faith norms." Currently, there is no widely accepted definition of faith norms as this concept is largely absent from the norms literature. For this reason, the study first defined a social norm as "a rule of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (a) most people in their reference network conform to it (empirical expectation), and (b) that most people in their reference network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectation)" (Bicchieri 2017, 22). Drawing on this, the study defined faith norms as follows: if norms are a set of unwritten rules of behavior that people in one group believe to be normal and appropriate within their community, then faith norms are what people believe to be normal and appropriate behavior shaped by their beliefs about God or a higher power, their experience of belonging to a faith community, their individual practices of faith, and/or their religious community teachings. Gender norms were defined as acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society (Cislagh and Heise 2019).

Faith was defined as a broad and inclusive phenomenon encompassing inner convictions and practices with spiritual or religious meanings for people (Tomalin 2013).

Spirituality is a set of inner experiences and feelings through which a person inwardly seeks meaning and purpose, as well as relationships with self, family, others, society, nature, and the significant or sacred (Austin et al. 2018). Hence, spirituality is related to personal meaning, purpose, values, beliefs, connectedness, transcendence, relatedness, immateriality, love, and the search for truth, experienced through the practice of a certain religion or philosophical tradition (Victor and Treschuk 2020). Consequently, religion conceptualizes the personal spirituality experienced at the individual level, involving "adherence to beliefs, doctrines, ethics, rituals, texts, and practices associated with a higher power either alone or among organized groups" (Austin et al. 2018, 2). Being religious often involves praying, participating in religious activities, and seeking spiritual guidance. Individuals typically belong to a religious community and follow certain rules and practices that shape group behavior (Victor and Treschuk 2020).

### Data Collection Methods

The study employed a mixed-method approach, including quantitative and qualitative methods and tools.

#### *Quantitative Survey*

A survey was conducted to measure faith and religiosity in the study communities across the three countries. The aim was to understand the extent to which individuals held faith beliefs, were religious, and perceived their communities as religious.

A survey questionnaire was developed including questions from the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (Huber and Huber 2012), consisting of five dimensions, shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Questions from the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (Huber and Huber 2012)**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Questions</b>
Faith beliefs	1. God or something divine/transcendent is important in my life
	2. My faith gives meaning to my life.
	3. I try to live in accordance with my faith beliefs
	4. My faith beliefs are important for my decision-making
Faith: Individual experience of God/divine	1. How often do you experience situation in which you have the feeling that you are in one with all?
	2. How often do you experience situation in which you have the feeling that God or something divine intervenes in your life?
	3. How often do you experience situation in which you have the feeling that you are touched by a divine power?
	4. How often do you have experience situation in which you have the feeling that God or something divine is present?
Private practice of religion	1. How important is personal prayer for you?
	2. How often do you pray?
	3. How often do you pray spontaneously when inspired by daily situations?
Public practice of religion	How often do you take part in religious services (this means going to a mosque, temple or church and taking part in services there)?
	How important is to take part in religious services?
	How important is it for you to be connected to a religious community?
Intellectual interest in religion	1. How often do you read or listen to Holy Scriptures?
	2. How often do you keep yourself informed about religious questions through radio, television, internet, newspapers, or books?

	3. How often do you think about religious issues?
	4. How interested are you in learning more about religious topics?

The survey also examined faith norms with direct and indirect influence on the practice of child marriage. Survey respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

- My faith says that marriage/living with a partner maritally (unofficial marriage) before the age of 18 is not allowed.
- Girls in my faith community should only be married/living with a partner maritally (unofficial marriage) as adults (over 18 years).
- Those who want to end marriage/living with a partner maritally (unofficial marriage) before the age of 18 are not opposing our faith beliefs and values.
- My faith does not say that the most important role for females is to become a wife and a mother.
- God/Allah/Gods/Higher Power/Transcendent has not created males as superior over females.

The survey was administered to 217 community members (above 18 years old) in Mozambique, 391 in Nepal, and 378 in the Philippines, who were sampled based on a random household-based sampling method. Households were selected using a "random" walk strategy, with individuals chosen within the households utilizing a grid by De Vaus (2014). The survey was conducted electronically using digital devices such as smart phones or tablets. The samples in Mozambique and Nepal were relatively gender-balanced. For example, 54.4% of survey respondents in Mozambique were women, and 45.6% were men. In the Philippines, there were more women (75.9%) than men (24.1%). The samples in Nepal and the Philippines were similar in terms of age groups, with around 77% of the sample in these countries comprised of respondents aged between 18 - 49. In Mozambique, the percentage for these age categories was slightly lower (69.6%) (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

**Table 2: Sample Characteristics**

Variables	Countries		
	Mozambique (N = 217)	Nepal (N=391)	Philippines (N=378)
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	45.6%	50.9%	24.1%
Female	54.4%	49.1%	75.9%
<b>Age</b>			
18 - 29 years old	15.7%	26.6%	29.1%
30 - 39 years old	22.6%	25.8%	20.4%
40 - 49 years old	31.3%	24.3%	27%
50 - 59 years old	18%	13.6%	15.6%
60 + years old	12.4%	9.7%	7.9%

A descriptive analysis of statistical data was undertaken. The guidance of Huber and Huber (2012) was used to analyze the data from the Centrality of Religiosity Scale. Scores were computed for each sub-scale by summing the values of all items and then dividing the sum score by the number of items within each sub-scale. Consequently, the scores ranged between 1.0 and 5.0. These scores were subsequently categorized into three groups according

to Huber and Huber's (2012) thresholds: "non-religious" (1.0 – 2.0), "religious" (2.1 – 3.9), and "highly religious" (4.0 – 5.0). ANOVA and Chi-square tests were employed to ascertain the statistical significance of differences between various groups in the sample.

### *Qualitative Methods and Tools*

The study also conducted focus group discussions with community members to explore the current trends in child marriage in their community and the significance of faith and religion as well as socio-economic factors in the continuation or ending of child marriage. In each of the three countries, 16 focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted, with at least five community members in each FGD representing different age, gender, and marital status groups:

1. Unmarried girls aged 16-18;
2. Unmarried boys aged 16-18;
3. Young adult women (>18 years) who are unmarried with no children;
4. Young adult men (>18 years) who are unmarried with no children;
5. Married women with children under the age of 16;
6. Married men with children under the age of 16;
7. Grandmothers with grandchildren under the age of 16;
8. Grandfathers with grandchildren under the age of 16.

A total of 80 people in each country took part in the FGDs, with a total of 240 participants engaging with the FGDs. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using a thematic approach.

### *Limitations*

The study also conducted semi-structured interviews with influential people in the community, which included faith leaders in some communities. However, this article focuses on the perspectives of community members. In retrospect, it is considered that intentionally conducting separate focus groups with religious leaders might have provided an understanding of the differences in opinions between community members and faith leaders.

## **Findings**

### *Faith and Religiosity*

In all three study countries, a high level of religious affiliation was evident, although there were some differences between countries. In Nepal and the Philippines, all respondents reported being affiliated with a religious group. In Nepal, almost 97% of surveyed community members identified themselves as Hindu, and nearly all respondents in the study communities in the Philippines were Muslim. In Mozambique, approximately 91% of surveyed community members stated that they belonged to one of the religions. The remaining 9% indicated having no religious affiliation. The Mozambican sample was composed of Christian (78.3%) and Muslim (12.4%) respondents (Table 2). Among Christians, there was a great denominational diversity, including Movement Back to God, Harvest Family Church, Old Apostle, Methodist, Emanuel Wesliano, Twelve Apostle Church, Paradise Union, The Faithful Church of God, Ministry Praise Center, and Zion Apostolo Christian Church of Mozambique.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 2: Faith Belonging**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Countries</b>
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	<b>Mozambique (N = 217)</b>	<b>Nepal (N=391)</b>	<b>Philippines (N=378)</b>
<b>Faith</b>			
Christian	78.3%	-	0.3%
Muslim	12.4%	3.1%	-
Hindu	-	96.9%	99.7%
Other	-	-	-
No religion	9.2%	-	-

The average score for faith and religiosity of surveyed community members from Nepal was 3.31, indicating that they identified themselves as religious. The average scores were higher for faith beliefs (3.83), private practice of religion (3.58), and public practice of religion (3.24) than for faith experience (2.84) and intellectual interest in religion (2.72) (Table 3).

The situation in the Philippines was different as the average score for faith and religiosity was significantly higher (4.15) than in Nepal and Mozambique, indicating that respondents in the Philippines reported being highly religious. The same dimensions as in Nepal and Mozambique had high scores in the Philippines: faith beliefs (4.60), private practice (4.71), and public practice (4.09) (Table 3).

**Table 3: Average Scores from Nepal, the Philippines, and Mozambique for Faith and Religiosity**

<b>Domains of faith and religiosity</b>	<b>Nepal</b>	<b>Philippines</b>	<b>Mozambique</b>
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Faith beliefs	3.83***	4.60	4.42***
Faith experience	2.84***	3.91	4.00
Private practice of religion	3.58***	4.71	4.02***
Public practice of religion	3.24***	4.09	3.95
Intellectual interest in religion	2.72***	3.78	3.50***
Overall score	3.31***	4.15	3.79***

\*  $p > .05$ , \*\*  $p > .01$ , \*\*\*  $p > .001$

In Mozambique, the average score for faith and religiosity was 3.79, which was significantly lower than in the Philippines but significantly higher than in Nepal (Table 3). Considering that the score was still below 4, the level of religiosity was identified as religious. However, when disaggregated by religious groups, the average scores for faith and religiosity were significantly different between Christians and Muslims, with the former group falling within the category of religious and the latter within the group of highly religious. Muslim respondents reported a significantly higher level of private and public practice of their religion (Table 4). This can be explained by the obligatory prayers (*Salat*) and private prayers (*Du'a*) in Islam (Huber and Huber 2012).

**Table 4: Average Scores from Mozambique for Faith and Religiosity—Christians and Muslims**

<b>Domains of faith and religiosity</b>	<b>Mozambique</b>	
	Christian	Muslim
	Mean	Mean
Faith beliefs	4.47	4.47
Faith experience	4.11	3.94
Private practice of religion	4.11***	4.67
Public practice of religion	4.09***	4.60



Intellectual interest in religion	3.60	3.86
Overall score	3.90***	4.33

\*  $p > .05$ , \*\*  $p > .01$ , \*\*\*  $p > .001$

### *Faith Norms on Child Marriage*

In general, more than half of the surveyed community members in each country agreed that their faith prohibited marriage (official and unofficial) before the age of 18, and girls should only get married as adults. Significant differences were observed between countries ( $p < 0.05$ ), with the highest agreement level found in Mozambique. However, there was a considerable percentage of respondents, especially in Nepal, who did not agree with these statements. Approximately 42% of surveyed community members in Nepal and about 18% in the Philippines believed that their faith allowed official or unofficial marriage before the age of 18. Moreover, around 26% in Nepal and 30% in the Philippines thought that girls in their community could marry or live with a partner maritally (unofficial marriage) before the age of 18 (Table 5).

The agreement with statements on gender roles from a faith perspective were much lower across the three countries. Few respondents in three countries agreed that, according to their faith, being a wife and a mother is not the most important role for women and that men were not created superior to women. Among countries, respondents in the Philippines expressed the lowest level of agreement with these statements. For example, only 4.5% of respondents agreed that their faith does not say that the most important role for females is to become a wife and a mother. Respondents in Nepal expressed the highest agreement (Table 5).

**Table 5: Agreement with Statements on Faith Norms**

Statements around faith norms	Respondents' agreement with the statements		
	Nepal (n=391)	Philippines (n=378)	Mozambique (n=217)
My faith says that marriage or living with a partner maritally (unofficial marriage) before the age of 18 is not allowed.	58.5%***	81.7%**	96.3%
Girls in my faith community should only be married or live with a partner maritally (unofficial marriage) as adults (over 18 years)	73.9%***	69.8%**	94%
My faith does not say that the most important role for females is to become a wife and a mother	33%	4.5%***	29.5%**
God/Allah/Gods/Higher Power/Transcendent has not created male as superior over female	44.8%***	11.4%	18.4%

\*  $p > .05$ , \*\*  $p > .01$ , \*\*\*  $p > .001$

Furthermore, significant differences were observed between the responses of women and men in Nepal and the Philippines. Significantly more men in Nepal than women believed that their faith did not allow marriage before the age of 18. However, concurrently, significantly more men than women in Nepal believed that, according to their faith, a woman's role is to be a wife and a mother, and that men are not created superior to women. In the Philippines, the dynamic was different; significantly more women believed that girls should marry only as adults, while significantly more men believed that men were not created superior to women by Allah/God (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

**Table 7: Agreement with Statements on Faith Norms, by Gender**

Statements around faith norms	Respondents' agreement with the statements					
	Nepal (n=391)		Philippines (n=378)		Mozambique (n=217)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
My faith says that marriage or living with a partner maritally (unofficial marriage) before the age of 18 is not allowed.	51%	66.3%***	80.5%	86%	97.5%	94.9%
Girls in my faith community should only be married or live with a partner maritally (unofficial marriage) as adults (over 18)	69.8%	77.9%	77.4%***	46.2%	93.2%	94.9%
My faith does not say that the most important role for females is to become a wife and a mother	48.4%***	18.10%	3.8%	6.6%	33.1%	25.3%
God/Allah/Gods/Higher Power/Transcendent has not created male as superior over female	53.6%**	36.2%	9.8%	16.5%***	18.6%	18.2%

\*  $p > .05$ , \*\*  $p > .01$ , \*\*\*  $p > .001$

FGDs across the three countries showed that belief in religion was strong, and people were generally hesitant to break with perceived religious principles. Community members in the three countries recognized the influence of faith and religion on child marriage practices, but there were differences in the degree to which faith and religion were perceived as a contributing factor to child marriage. Study participants in Nepal and Mozambique tended to downplay the significance of faith in the continuation of child marriage, with the majority of respondents not linking child marriage directly to faith and religion. The following quotations were typical:

"Religion has no role for the continuation of child marriage, but has a role for stopping it. It sensitizes believers to stop this practice." (Study participant from Mozambique)

"We do not see any faith or religion-based rewards or advantages of performing child marriage. The only reason of parents for getting their child married is the provision of low dowry<sup>3</sup> if get married in early age." (Study participant from Nepal)

In contrast, in the Philippines, faith-based justifications within Islamic communities were acknowledged as contributing factors to the practice. The role of faith and religion in child marriage was said to be multifaceted. Study participants in the Philippines emphasized that one needs to have a strong understanding of Islam to make informed decisions about marriage. They noted that, while generally, marrying at an early age was not allowed in their faith, exceptions were permitted if individuals desired to get married at an early age voluntarily. Hence, study participants highlighted that marrying without a thorough understanding of Islamic values was a potential source of misinterpretation as this quotation explains:

“We have our own law in Islam. In Islam, there is a process for marriage. In the matter that if the woman/man is not of the right age they cannot be married. But, if they show their own desire to marry in Islam, it should be given to them.” (Study participant from the Philippines)

Across all three countries, study participants perceived that getting married and building a family was a desirable outcome in life, particularly for women. Commonly, they referred to elements of faith and religion while talking about the importance of marriage and family in one’s life. For example, study participants in the Philippines said that it was destiny for women to be married. It was considered a blessing to have one’s own family. In Nepal, parents thought that they would go to heaven if they ensured that their children were married and settled in life, while grandparents believed that they would go to heaven if they played with their grandchildren. Consequently, getting married and building a family were key goals for several generations (youth, parents, grandparents) as these were believed to be a pathway to living a righteous life according to their faith beliefs and achieving religious rewards. Being married and having a family was a community norm rooted in faith and religion as community members expected women and men to get married and have a family.

Further, study participants across the three countries perceived that marriage served as a space for engaging in sexual relationships and for childbirth. Hence, premarital sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancy were identified as key issues for girls and women because they lose their dignity and respect in the community, depriving them of the prospect of a good marriage. For example, in the Philippines, premarital sex was deemed *haram* (forbidden) in Islam, being regarded as *fitnah* (temptation). Families also faced the risk of a loss of status or social reputation if their daughters engaged in premarital sex and experienced out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Therefore, study participants in all three countries saw marriage as protection for girls from sins of premarital sex and the loss of dignity and respect for their family in the community.

Child marriage was also seen as a way to tackle teenage pregnancy to avoid social stigma. For instance, in Mozambique, study participants highlighted that girls, when married, are protected from the risk of becoming an unmarried single mother. Therefore, study participants noted that it was important for parents and caregivers to marry off their daughters early, especially if they fall pregnant out of wedlock. They also said that parents and caregivers want their children to have a partner and a stable family life. They hurry the marriage of their daughters because they fear that, if left longer, it will be difficult for girls to get married (especially to a good family and a good husband and for a low dowry).

## **Discussion**

### *Faith and Religiosity*

The findings of this study reveal a similar trend among communities in three countries—Mozambique, Nepal, and the Philippines. Almost all study participants indicated their affiliation with a faith group. The communities were identified as religious, with Muslim communities being particularly religious. Specifically, in each of the three countries, the dimensions of faith beliefs and private practice of religion scored high in comparison to other dimensions of the Centrality of Religiosity Scale. In all three countries, individuals indicated that God or something divine/transcendent was important in their lives, their faith gave meaning to their lives, and their faith beliefs were important for decision-making. Individual prayer also emerged as a common practice in each country. This evidence indicates that faith and religion hold significant importance in the lives of people across countries with different

religious landscapes—Christian, Hindu, and Muslim. This suggests that faith and religion need to be taken into account in various social initiatives, including interventions such as ending child marriage.

### *General Trends*

Furthermore, in general, community members across the three countries believed that their faith did not allow child marriage and that, according to their faith, girls should be married as adults. Similarly, a prevalent trend in these countries was that community members thought, according to their faith, a woman's role was to become a wife and mother, and they were subordinate to men. The fact that these trends in the data are generally similar across the three countries with different faith contexts is interesting. It demonstrates the commonality of the situation across different faith groups, indicating that the issue of marriage before the age of 18 is not necessarily religion-specific as suggested in the literature (Corno and Voena 2016; ICRW, 2007) but it has to do with gender norms.

### *Specifics of Local Contexts*

However, when examining each country separately, differences emerged that reflected distinct local contexts across the three countries. Hindu communities in Nepal appeared to be religious, albeit to a lesser degree than the Muslim community in the Philippines and the Christian and Muslim communities in Mozambique. Nevertheless, a larger percentage of community members in Nepal, compared to Mozambique and the Philippines, believed that marriage before the age of 18 was permissible. During FGDs in Nepal, the responses of community members differed, as they downplayed the faith-based influence on child marriage. Most FGD participants stated that there were no faith-based reasons for the continuation of child marriage in their community. Only a few participants from the older generation (grandparents) made reference to certain faith beliefs linked to child marriage. Even when references to faith were made, no specific teachings were mentioned. Despite this greater belief among survey participants in Nepal that faith allowed child marriage, a higher percentage of community members in Nepal, compared to the other two countries, believed that women and men were created equally according to their faith. The data also indicated differences in responses between men and women. More men than women believed that child marriage was not allowed by their faith, but they also believed that men were created superior to women.

In Mozambique, the surveyed communities also emerged as religious, with the Muslim community showing high religiosity. The percentage of community members who believed that their faith did not allow marriage before the age of 18 and that girls should be married only as adults was the highest in Mozambique from among the three countries. This finding aligns with the results of the FGD data, where participants also downplayed the role of faith in child marriage. Additionally, similar to Nepal, close to one-third of surveyed community members in Mozambique believed that their faith did not dictate that the primary role of women should be that of a mother and a wife. However, the belief that men were created superior to women according to their faith was more common in Mozambique than in Nepal. No significant differences were found in the responses of women and men in Mozambique.

In the Philippines, surveyed community members were identified as highly religious compared to Nepal and Mozambique. This may be attributed to the fact that surveyed communities in the Philippines were predominantly Muslim. Huber and Huber (2012) also found that Muslim communities report high religiosity due to obligatory prayers (*Salat*) and private prayers (*Du'a*) in Islam. In the Philippines, a greater number of people than in the other two countries believed that child marriage was allowed in their faith. This belief was

also reflected in the FGDs. Participants from the Philippines emphasized the importance of possessing a profound understanding of Islam when making decisions about marriage. They pointed out that it is permissible to marry before the age of 18 if individuals willingly choose to do so. Therefore, FGD participants noted that entering into marriage without a comprehensive understanding of Islamic values could lead to potential misinterpretations of faith teachings. Furthermore, participants in the Philippines agreed the least, compared to those in Nepal and Mozambique, that women and men were created equal by God/Allah/Gods/Higher Power/Transcendent. When examining the responses of men and women in the Philippines, more women than men believed that girls should marry only as adults. However, more men than women believed that men and women were equal according to their faith.

Significant differences in the responses of women and men in Nepal and the Philippines showed no clear-cut indication that either women or men fully supported child marriage from the perspective of their faith; rather, their views varied depending on the question asked. Generally, the trend was that men and women held different views. This indicates that local context matters, as the beliefs of community members may vary on each subject, emphasizing the need to engage with both women and men within the realities of the local contexts.

#### *Interconnection Between Faith and Gender Norms*

Finally, the fact that in each country most participants viewed women as subordinate to men with a role of being a mother and wife according to their faith indicates a tight interconnection between faith and gender norms. Gender norms are embedded in people's faith beliefs, religious practices, experiences of belonging to a faith community, and teachings received from their faith communities.

The faith beliefs about the role of marriage underpin the idea that performing marriage is part of being a good believer, receiving approval and acceptance from family and community, and results in having social status. Child marriage appears to be premised on this belief and, subsequently, driven by not only faith and religious beliefs but also cultural, social, and economic factors. The sin of premarital sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancy is the most salient religious belief driver of child marriage. For instance, in Christianity and Islam, premarital sex is deemed unacceptable (Adamczyk 2008; Gemignani and Wodon 2015; Uecker 2014). Child marriage is then a solution for communities to ensure that adolescents avoid premarital sex, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and abortion, all of which are seen as religious sins (Ghomeshi et al. 2016; Le Roux and Palm 2018; Kohno et al. 2020). It ensures that the ultimate objective of being in a marriage is achieved with no sins committed, preserving the dignity and respect of the family (Grijns and Horii 2018; Le Roux and Palm 2018). These beliefs shape parenting that revolves around protecting girls' purity and preventing out-of-wedlock pregnancy and abortion (Kohno et al. 2020). Parents believed that ensuring the marriage of their children was their religious duty (Le Roux and Palm 2018). The current study showed that parents consider that there are religious rewards (i.e., go to heaven) if their children are married and settled. As discussed in the literature, other factors driving child marriage include economic challenges, educational barriers, and cultural practices such as dowry.

In summary, this discussion underscores the importance of considering the intersection of gender norms with faith and religion in efforts to end child marriage, as these factors emerged as significant in the communities of the three study countries. Despite variations in the level of religiosity, communities in all three countries consistently emphasized the significance of their faith beliefs and religious practices. These distinctions underscore the importance of local context and the intricate interplay of faith and religion

with different aspects of the local context such as social and gender norms. While faith serves as an overarching framework, it simultaneously reflects and embeds itself within the local context, encompassing traditions, culture, social dynamics, economic factors, political influences, and other contextual elements.

## **Conclusion**

This mixed-method study examined the role of faith in child marriage in three countries with different faith landscapes: Mozambique, Nepal, and the Philippines. Faith and religion are strongly present in the communities as most of the survey respondents indicated they belong to a faith group and practice faith and religion in both private and public domains. Faith was identified as an influence on child marriage in an unexpected way. While most responses in each country did not think that marriage before 18 was allowed, they saw women's role as a mother and a wife and that women were subordinate to men according to their faith. Consequently, early marriage was seen as a strategy to fulfill this role and avoid the perceived sins of premarital sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancy. This finding clearly demonstrated the intersection of faith and gender norms, with the latter deeply ingrained in the former. Although the trend was similar across all countries, there were noticeable inter-country differences, underscoring the significance of local socio-economic context. Addressing child marriage necessitates a holistic approach that considers faith, gender dynamics, and socio-economic circumstances.

## **About the Authors**

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<sup>1</sup> Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Rep., Congo, Dem.Rep., Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

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<sup>2</sup> Movimento volta pra Deus, Igreja Familia Colheita, Velha Apostolo, Metodista, Emanuel Wesliano, Igreja Doze Apostolo, União Paraiso, AIgreja Fiel de Deus, Ministerio Centro de Louvor, Igreja Cristã Zion Apostolo de Moçambique.

<sup>3</sup> Dowry consists of marriage gifts provided by the bride's family to the groom's family. This practice is widespread in South Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Nepal (Khanal and Sen 2020). The literature suggests that historically, dowries were tokenistic and received from friends and well-wishers. However, since the colonial period, the nature of dowry has evolved to include cash and market goods, including land. A higher dowry is seen as "a fair price to pay to secure a desirable groom of good family and employment status who will be able to provide his bride with a comfortable life" (Kishwar, cited in White 2016). Meanwhile, families with low income tend to marry off their daughters at a younger age, as the price of the dowry increases with the girl's age (Singh and Vennam 2016).